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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some cultural misconceptions about young adolescents, describes the outcomes of this distortion, and offers suggestions for the ways in which curriculum can begin to liberate and empower them. Given that early adolescents in the United States are neglected, ignored, stereotyped, and negatively affected by certain social forces, a middle-level education is needed that is both liberating and empowering. Such a curriculum would be rich in meaning and respond to the developmental needs of young adolescents, deal specifically with societal issues, and help young adolescents understand the social forces that exploit them or hinder their development. It is suggested that middle-level curriculum include historical and cross-cultural studies of adolescence that explore the interaction between aspects of adolescent development and societal forces, the development of values, and the relationship between intellectual development and schooling. (Contains 44 references.) (LMI)

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A Curriculum To Empower Young Adolescents

(A paper delivered at the 19th Annual Convention of the National Middle School Association in San Antonio, TX, November 5-8, 1992)

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A Curriculum To Empower Young Adolescents

In a number of significant ways, young adolescents in our society constitute a minority group. They have been neglected, misunderstood, stereotyped, and to some extent, exploited. Like all minority groups, they need to be empowered. Unfortunately, we attribute much of their "undesirable" behavior to innate biological forces, ignoring powerful societal influences which inhibit rather than foster their development.

The purposes of this chapter are to examine our distorted views of young adolescents, to describe some of the results of this distortion, and to suggest ways in which curriculum can begin to liberate and empower them.

Neglect and Ignorance

Historically, young adolescents have been ignored and neglected. Psychologically, we have spent far more time and effort in trying to understand the development of young children and older adolescents than we have that of this age range. Freud focuses intensively on the first five years of life, gives the subsequent "latency" period a light touch, and then skips to late adolescence and adulthood. Gissell is concerned almost entirely with early childhood. The chief stage theorists, Piaget, Kohlberg and Erikson, while including early adolescence in their frameworks, have devoted relatively little research and thick description to 11-14 year olds.

In terms of community services, few nurses,doctors, social workers, or juvenile justice workers have had any specific preparation for dealing with young adolescents. For example, less than five percent of the physicians in this country have had a course in adolescent medicine. Moreover, there is little coordination among various social agencies that service this age group (Lipsitz,1980).

The neglect of young adolescents in schooling is notorious. We have had a two-tiered system of elementary and secondary education, with the middle level subsumed under the latter or split between the two. To this day, the U.S. Department of Education keeps no middle level statistics. Teacher education has reflected two tiers, with elementary preparation focusing upon grades K-3, secondary preparation upon grades 10-12, and osmosis presumably taking care of those teachers interested in the middle grades. Most teachers in the old junior high schools were not there

by choice; unable to attain high school jobs, they accepted junior high jobs as stepping stones. Little wonder, then, that data relative to teacher absenteeism, longevity, commitment and job satisfaction were more negative in junior highs than at any other level of education. (?-to come)

Curriculum designed specifically for middle grades education has been paltry. This level has received nothing like the time, interest and money that has gone into Headstart or the B.S.S.C. or P.S.S.C. curriculum projects. In addition, many parents who have been actively involved in their children's elementary education withdraw their support during the middle grades.

Happily, this situation is improving dramatically. During the past 10 years or so, there has been a great upsurge of interest in young adolescents. Developmental research is burgeoning, and the middle school movement has made a tremendous change in the quality of schooling, particularly in the areas of school organization and school climate. Some 30 states now have middle level teacher education programs and/or required middle level certification (Alexander and McEwin, 1989), and many teachers are now in the committed to middle level teaching. Efforts are being made to help parents understand young adolescents and to become involved in their schooling.

Early Adolescent Stereotypes

Where there is neglect, there is ignorance. And where there is ignorance, there is but a short step to developing myths and stereotypes. Clearly, young adolescents have suffered from a legacy of neglect and its resulting distortions. Bennett (1919), or example, saw the junior high as a means of checking "the physical, mental, and moral evils that accompany and grow out of adolescence." Briggs (1920) argued that "the influence of the early adolescents on small children is frequently bad, and that if kept by themselves during the transition to you they will be less influenced to imitate the undesirable traits of older pupils." Sound familiar?

Despite the recent positive trends mentioned above, middle level education is still shackled by denigrating views of young adolescents. Should anyone doubt this assertion, simply listen to the conversation in the faculty lounge of a middle level school that is not functioning well. At best, young adolescents are likely to be

characterized as "difficult" in these instances; more likely descriptorsare "crazy, rude, impossible" or the like. Or witness the condolences one gets at a cocktail party upon stating, "I teach eighth grade." Or attend a middle level conference, where descriptors such as "range of the strange" and "hormones with feet" draw chuckles.....The belief system underlying such stereotyped perceptions is that early adolescence is inherently a time of *sturm and drang*, or storm and stress, set forth initially in psychiatric literature (Hall, 1904) and subsequently popularized by the media. Elsewhere (Arnold, 1980) I have described it as follows:

> *According to popular wisdom, young adolescents are inherently id-driven, irrational, and argumentative. In mortal combat with adult authority, they have withdrawn into a peer culture which rejects adult values. They are interested primarily in social concerns, not intellectual activities. Therefore, the best thing schools can do is to place them in a highly structured environment, address their social needs, and hope that they will eventually outgrow the "disease" known as early adolescence.*

Clearly, this destructive view is filled with half-truths, distortions and outright falsehoods. True, early adolescence is a difficult time for many young people. However, it not so for all youth, and it is not *inevitably* so for any of them.

A plethora of data indicate that early adolescence is not inherently a time of storm and stress. Cross-cultural studies those by Meade (1924) and Malinowski (1929) indicate that in societies where the young are well integrated into the social fabric, clear roles exist, and there are established rites of passage into adulthood, adolescence in a behavioral sense does not exist. Examinations of cultures before the industrial revolution (Aries 1962; Film Board of Canada, 1971) where children were apprenticed at age six or seven, grew up in extended families, and were included in virtually all adult activities, also show adolescence as we know it is non-existent. This circumstance remained in effect in many farming communities long after the industrial revolution. Further, studies of normal adolescents (Bandura, 1969), as well as personal observations, indicate that many young people in our society grow up with relatively little duress. All of us have known young teenagers who are poised, comfortable with adults, and happy with their lives.

In a brilliant essay, Bakan (1972) points out that the child labor and compulsory education laws have institutionalized adolescence in our society. By removing children from the work force and placing them with people their own age for much of the day, we have isolated youth from the adult world and in effect, created a sub-culture. This isolation has been exacerbated by the breakdown of family life, parent work patterns, and numerous other contemporary trends. Thus, "It is not so much that youth have withdrawn from the adult world; rather, they have been excluded" (Film Board of Canada, 1971).

In terms of the notion that young adolescents have rejected adult values, there is much counter evidence. While many young people prefer to associate with peers and rely upon peer judgments relative to decisions about clothing, music and such, most rely upon parents or significant adults in their lives when deciding about matters of great importance to them. The closer the relationship between parent and child, the greater this tendency (Curtiss, 1975; Young, 1979). Again, most young adolescents choose friends whose parents have values similar to those of their own parents (Conger, 1977).

With regard to the belief that young adolescents are intellectually inert, there is *no* supporting evidence. Rather, cognitive developmental studies show that early adolescence is a time of *heightened* intellectual activity. The capacity to think systematically and hypothetically, to handle multiple variables, to reflect critically upon their own thought and that of others, to see shades of grey, and to pose crucial questions about identity and values are but a few of the mental abilities which become manifest at this time.

There are three major, destructive consequences of adherence to the stereotyped view of early adolescence portrayed above. First, it induces self-fulfilling prophecies. If we expect middle schoolers to act in irrational, rebellious ways, we are quite likely to see such behavior manifest. There is ample evidence to indicate that people behave in accordance with the perceptions and expectations of those in authority, and this is especially true of young adolescents, who are finely tuned to the perceptions of others.

A second danger of the popular view is that by ignoring societal forces which strongly affect behavior, our understanding of early adolescent development becomes grossly distorted. We

commit the "naturalistic fallacy", confusing what is with what ought to be. Development is not simply a "biological unfolding"; it involves interaction between biological readiness and experience. Certain experiences promote development, others inhibit it (Dewey,1938). And the experiences which promote or inhibit development are substantially influenced by social conditions in a given society.

A final danger, closely related to the second one, is that the popular view mitigates against change. If we believe certain adolescent behavior is inevitable, our question becomes, "How can we cope with these kids?" However, if we believe that societal forces influence behavior to a considerable degree, our question becomes, "How can we change things (especially conditions in schools) so that students don't experience so much turmoil?"

We now turn to a closer examination of the issues related to these latter two dangers.

Societal Forces and Development

Since this essay is primarily concerned with interpreting adolescent behavior that is generally deemed undesirable, the thrust of the following discussion will be upon social forces which tend to inhibit healthy development. However, it must be mentioned that American society obviously exerts numerous positive influences upon development. Our democratic heritage, concern for the individual, and affluence foster aspects of development much more facilely than do some other cultures. To cite but one example, our abundance of food promotes healthy physical development much more than do the near starvation conditions of some third world countries.

Yet surely all is not sweetness and light on the homefront. Modern industrial society has brought a lot of baggage with it. For example, the separation of youth from the world of work, their isolation in schools, and their lack of integration into the full society has had profound effect upon their **socio-emotional development**. In contrast to the children of yesteryear who worked as apprentices or on farms, most youth today are simply not needed by their technological society; they can perform little work that is socially useful. Such a condition surely must contribute to the drop in self-esteem which many young adolescents experience (Sprinthall and Collins, 1984). As Paul Goodman (1960) puts it , "It's hard to feel good about yourself when you have nothing much to do."

In addition, isolation from the adult world robs youth of many opportunities to assume real responsibilities and to enjoy or suffer real world consequences for their efforts. Thus their capacity to mature and achieve independence is inhibited. Where no meaningful consequences are attached to behavior, it is easy for anyone to languish. Further this separation of youth and adults makes it much more difficult for them to understand one another. Should we wonder that a generation gap exists?

The isolation of the young goes beyond separation from the "real world"; many youth are isolated from their parents. Due to job pressures, their own problems, lack of concern, or whatever, far too many parents are not spending enough time with their children. (And "quality time" is not an adequate substitute for sufficient time.) As a result, many children and adolescents are not given enough basic care and nurturing. Nor are they receiving enough supervision, and this in an environment of enormous "over-choice." They are lonely.....

The impact of this situation upon identity formation, self confidence, initiative, and a host of other variables seems incalculable.

And should we wonder that peers are important to young adolescents, and that peer pressure greatly affects their behavior? For many youth, peers are the only people available .....

In terms of **physical development**, it is too easily assumed that hormones produce wild and deviant behavior, that preoccupation with physique and appearance are inevitable, and that weird eating habits are normal, to mention but a few misconceptions. Yet we should scarcely be surprised that young people have difficulties with sexuality in a culture where the media constantly titillate the populace while traditionalists preach abstinence; where some schools pass out condoms while others offer courses in "postponing sexual involvement"; where conflicting messages about homosexuality and AIDS are pervasive while virtually no one is talking to young people about what they need to know most: the emotional concomitants and commitment related to sexual involvement.

Moreover, the extended nature of adolescence in western societies causes difficulties. An ethic of sexual abstinence is one thing in a culture where pubescence occurs at age 14 and marriage at

age 16; it is another thing where puberty begins at age 12 and marriage often takes place in the mid-twenties or later. That's a lot of cold showers.....

While some degree of narcissism is probably innate to all humans, our culture has heightened concern about appearance and physique like no other. The *Seventeen Magazine* cover-girl look holds sway, torturing untold thousands of young (and perhaps not so young) girls who feel they too should be shapely 105 pounders with blond hair down to their waists, displaying vacant stares. Does anyone over age 40 recall as an adolescent knowing anyone who was anorexic or bulemic? Does anyone wonder why these disorders are appearing so frequently now?

For boys, growing up in a society where physical prowess and sports ability are so prized is no easy matter. While early developers are subject to expectations that they will be more emotionally mature than others as well as be good athletes (whether they are interested or not), it is the late developing boys who seem to suffer most. The Berkeley Growth Studies (Jones, 1958) show that late developers, when compared to early developers, are less popular, assume fewer leadership roles, have more conflict with authority, and exhibit more neurotic behavior. More importantly, these differences persist into adulthood and appear to be life-long. The societal nature of this phenomenon becomes even more apparent when studies of adolescent females in our culture and adolescent boys in other cultures do not reveal these early/late maturer differences. (Faust'1960)

The negative impact of societal forces upon the **intellectual development** of young adolescents is enormous in a culture where education is largely seen as a pill to be swallowed in exchange for a good job in the future, not something that might make one a better, more interesting and fulfilled person; where adults read less than one book per year but label intellectuals "eggheads" ; where schooling glorifies mediocrity stressing minimal competencies, rote learning, standardized tests, grades and other extrinsic rewards, and it is not too "cool" to be too smart.

This notwithstanding, it is simply blasphemous for teachers to believe that young adolescents are intellectually inert. If we adhere to this stereotyped belief, we may as well fold our tents; our capacity genuinely to educate is nil. While it may be true that many youth have little interest in school, we must be careful not to confuse what

is academic with what is intellectual. Students may not care about parsing verbs or dividing fractions; this does not mean they care nothing about the issues that impinge upon their lives. They are asking profound questions about life and its meaning. A grave problem is that the farther students advance in schooling, the greater the gap between the curriculum and their immediate interests.

The effects of societal forces upon **moral development** are perhaps most devastating of all. The confused messages about sexuality discussed above are but one aspect of the problem. Young people are immersed in a culture where violence and duplicity abound; where greed and power are extolled; where image counts more than integrity, celebrity more than heroism. Moral relativism, the idea that ethics are simply a matter of what individuals or cultures believe to be right or wrong, holds the day. In schools, we use the profoundly redundant term "moral education" but shy away from dealing with moral issues lest we be criticized for "teaching values"; when we do venture forth, we do it under the delusion that there are value-neutral positions.

Yet we must not forget that adolescence is a time of idealism and of constructing personal values; that adolescents are "moral phisosophers" (Kohlberg and Gilligan,1972). To buy into the notion that they reject sound values and are dominated by rebellious peer values is highly destructive.

Exploitation

In many ways, the massive societal forces which hinder young adolescents' development seem impersonal and beyond anyone's control. However, upon closer examination we find that these forces often involve the conscious exploitation of youth. For example, the advertising industry understands quite well the "imaginary audience" phenomenon (Elkind, 1967), i.e., that because they are preoccupied with their own appearance, young adolescents assume everyone else is also. The industry also comprehends, and indeed has helped create, 'the big lie' (Van Hoose and Strahan, 1988), the early adolescent belief that, "There exists this perfect teenager and I am not he/she; therefore there is something wrong with me." Thus advertisers prey on the insecurities of young people, convincing them that they should look a certain way, dress a certain way, and act a certain way to be acceptable---all of which purchase of the advertiser's product will help bring about. True, advertising uses

similar approaches with everyone, but the practice seems especially insidious and exploitative given the vulnerability of youth. All of this, of course, creates and maintains a "youth culture", which in addition to opening up a whole new market, contributes to the separation of youth from the adult world.

The child labor and compulsory education laws, enacted originally to keep youth from being exploited and to open future opportunities for them, ironically have the opposite effect in some instances. A considerable number of young people would like to have full time jobs and would benefit more from productive work than from languishing in schools. At a minimum, numerous work/study and apprenticeships programs such as are available in Germany and other European countries need to be offered. But resistance from unions, as well a lack of urgency about the issue, keeps young adolescents in "their place."

As has oft been pointed out, the entire process of schooling has other exploitative aspects. By their curricula, grouping procedures, teaching techniques, evaluation methods, and general policies, schools serve a "stamping and sorting" function for society (Freire, 1970), deeming some acceptable, others not acceptable for opportunities in the work force. Students who are poor, who are minorities, or who have difficulties with traditional methods are often at a distinct disadvantage in this system.

Moreover, it is questionable how serious schools are about fostering the moral development of students where it involves questioning the status quo. Schools are notorious for promoting obedience to authority (Jackson, 1968). Students who challenge school rules or the community's lack of environmental concern cause trouble; it is much easier to handle docile students.

The Need for Empowerment

Given the neglect, ignorance, stereotyping, and impact of societal forces related to early adolescence, it seems clear that we need a middle level education which is both liberating and empowering. What would the curriculum for such an education entail?

First, it would be genuinely responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents. In a previous article (Arnold, 1985), I have discussed five principles of such a curriculum. A developmentally responsive curriculum: (1) Helps young

adolescents make sense of themselves and their world, frequently dealing with their questions, not just those posed by texts and teachers; (2) Is geared to their level of readiness and understanding; (3) Emphasizes knowledge, not simply information and isolated skills; (4) Involves concrete and real world experience; and (5) Is taught by teachers who trust their instincts and who share their humanity with students.

Second, an empowering curriculum must be rich in meaning (Arnold, 1991). Thus it must deal with issues that are worth knowing; explore values which are involved in those issues; relate the issues to students' lives and then extend them into a larger context; and translate all of this into activities which stimulate inquiry, promote first hand knowledge, and encourage expression.

Third, an empowering curriculum must deal specifically with societal issues. In a provocative and well reasoned monograph, (Beane, 1990) argues forcefully for abandoning the traditional discipline-centered curriculum in lieu of theme-centered curriculum which blend early adolescent concerns with societal concerns. The major themes which emerge include transitions; identities; interdependence; wellness; social structures; independence; conflict resolution; commercialism; justice; caring; and institutions.

Finally, an empowering curriculum must help young adolescents understand the forces which are exploiting them and/or are hindering their development. As Freire (197) tells us, the first step for people who have been exploited is to "name their world", that is, to identify and be conscious of the forces affecting them. The range of possibilities for a curriculum of empowerment are limitless; I will simply discuss a few that are suggested earlier in this chapter.

A study of adolescence itself would be a logical starting point. What is adolescence? How does it relate to puberty? To what extent are certain adolescent characteristics biologically determined? Socially determined? What difference does it make if characteristics are biologically or socially determined? In what ways is adolescence different for boys than girls? For various ethnic groups? What are some of the predominant attitudes towards adolescence in our society? Why do many people have negative attitudes towards young adolescents? What role do the media play in this? What can be done to counter negative views?

This might lead into historical and cross-cultural studies of adolescence. What is adolescence like in tribal societies? What is the significance of rites of passage? What was adolescence like prior to

the industrial revolution? After it? What is it like in agrarian societies? How has the nature of family life and of work changed? What are some of the major causes of the isolation of adolescents from the adult world? What are some of the major results? How do you assess these? What can we do to help overcome some of this isolation? What obstacles will there be?

Aspects of adolescent development, and their interaction with societal forces, would be a crucial area to investigate. What are the major physical changes brought on by puberty? How do they vary among individuals? How does physical development affect one's emotions and self regard? What are the effects of being an early or late developer? What messages do the various media give adolescents about appearance and physique? What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of growing up in a culture which emphasizes competitive sports so much? How does our society differ from other societies' attitudes towards appearance and physique?

Again, what is maturity? Is there a relationship between physical and emotional maturity? What things promote independence and a mature identity? What things hinder their development? What role does our society in general play in this development? What role do peers play ? How do affluence and poverty affect social relationships and identity development?

Concerning values, how do we determine right and wrong? Are they simply a matter of opinion, or do principles of justice exist? How do we decide in situations where there are many shades of grey? What are some messages the media, and society in general give about "the good life"? About morality in general? What are the best values our society stands for? Some of the worst things it practices? How does this affect me? What is worth comiting myself to?

Finally, an investigation of intellectual development and schooling would be worthwhile. What is intelligence; is it one thing, or are there many types? What do schools believe and practice relative to this? What effect does this have upon students? What attitudes do people have towards people who are "dumb" and "smart"? How do I assess school rules and policies? How do teachers feel about teaching young adolescents?

Obviously these issues cannot or should not comprise an entire curriculum; there are many other topics which need attention. However, they need to be seriously investigated in the "regular

curriculum" as well as in interdisciplinary units, exploratory courses, and advisory programs. Equally obvious is the fact that these issues need to be elaborated and cast in more specific and concrete forms if students are to tackle them effectively. They are presented above in terms of somewhat abstract questions simply to suggest areas of investigation.

Charity James, the great British educator, once said to me, "There is considerable arrogance in the fact that we have a great deal of information about young adolescents but keep it from them. They have both a need and a right to know." This chapter is a plea for us to share what we already know, and in consort with them, to explore their plight in our society. In so doing, we will be taking a significant step in countering negative stereotypes of young adolescents as well as empowering them to understand themselves and to develop in a more healthy and fulfilling manner.

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